

Lesbian literatures of age and identity: the 'in-between worlds' within ageing

How much are we aged by biology, and how much by culture? Age criticism is a relatively new discipline – the word 'ageism' was only coined in 1968 by sociologist Robert Butler – but it has been asking this question since its inception. Feminists were among the first to investigate the idea of 'age identity,' and during the 1980s a handful of American older lesbian feminists took the women's movement to task about its own ageism. Writers like Baba Copper and Barbara MacDonald argued that age is not only a state of mind but a political construction, anticipating much that has now become mainstream in the thinking of age identity. Since then, there has been a growing recognition that 'age ideology,' from birthday cards to employment law, delivers negative messages about ageing as decline, deterioration and loss. But there are still not enough representations of older people – and especially older women – which offer a positive paradigm for ageing, one that goes beyond platitudes of acceptance, or, more insidiously, the chimera of retaining 'youth' in old age.

My thesis traces the early work of lesbian and feminist writers as they explored the subjectivity of older women at a time when this was still rare. I argue that this writing still has much to offer in challenging conventional and negative ideas of age-related changes, without sentimentalising or denying physical, as well as social, pain. I begin by setting out an overview of the theory that has accompanied this writing, including Copper and MacDonald's work. In particular, I explore its expansion in Margaret Gullette's theory of diachronic identity, in which the fluid character of identity means that many ages can exist simultaneously, and Kathleen Woodward's notion of a 'mirror stage' in mid- and older life. Such concepts provide guiding tools for my subsequent analysis of lesbian age writing. The thesis goes on to examine novels, life writing and poetry by older lesbians, organising the material thematically: chapters deal with menopause, memory and forgetting, sexuality and mortality respectively.

The conclusion hinges on lesbian age theory as an aspect of feminist and gender research based at the interface of queer and age identities. Minority writing on oldness has a particular usefulness in delineating the specificities of difference, or what critic Margaret Cruikshank has called 'the "in-between worlds" within aging.' Work by older lesbians can be seen as a tool for both understanding and shaping the experience of old age. This very particular literature, through its emphasis on continuity, friendship and community, refuses prescribed 'life stages' and instead offers paradigms for conscious and comfortable ageing.

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